

Homer and the Ancient Near East – what’s in a parallel?

Adrian Kelly

Classicists were once happy to deal exclusively with dead, white European males, tracing the evolution of modern Western culture in a direct line from the Greeks to the present. Yet from its likely inception sometime before the middle of the second millennium B.C., Hellenic civilization lived alongside much older and more powerful cultures in the Ancient Near East, and they were a potential source of influence and interaction right down through the Classical period and beyond. The Archaic period (c. 800–500 B.C.) seems to have been a particular hive of ‘orientalizing’ activity, with the Greeks taking over, among other things, alphabetic writing, large-scale temples, couches, divine statuettes, and metalworking from their neighbours. Texts in Akkadian, Sumerian, and Hittite were unearthed and read in the nineteenth century, and their many similarities with Greek myths and poems have led scholars to think that early Greek poets were heavily influenced by them. Here Adrian Kelly challenges this view and argues that focusing too heavily on the undoubted parallels between the texts may disguise the true originality and excitement of the Homeric poems.

A cultural melting-pot? *Gilgamesh* and the Greeks

To illustrate the complex relationship between the Homeric tradition and texts from the Ancient Near East, I will look at two cases where critics have sought to explain the Homeric passage by reference to its eastern ‘source’. I do not want to argue that older traditions had no influence on the Greeks, for that is both unlikely and impossible to prove. But the Homeric poet worked in an oral culture with a storytelling tradition reaching back into the Bronze Age and beyond, to its Indo-European roots. Whilst the Ancient Near East was no doubt influential, the prehistory of Greek epic is a many-splendoured thing, and we should keep that – and our inability to reconstruct it precisely – in mind.

This is even more necessary with regard to the Ancient Near East, especially with the famous *Gilgamesh* epic. Composed of stories witnessed in Sumerian texts of the early third millennium B.C. (we date Homer to the 8th or 7th centuries B.C.), it was translated into Babylonian and then gathered into a larger poem during the

second millennium. It is divided into 12 tablets, most of which date from the early first millennium B.C. Translated into several languages across the Ancient Near East, *Gilgamesh*’s stories were among the most characteristic and widespread artefacts of the region. Similarly, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the most enduring works of Greek literary culture, transmitted into the Roman world and beyond, serving as the ultimate manifestation of what it meant to be Greek. So on several levels it is wonderfully tempting to draw a more or less direct line between these texts. Should we give in to this temptation?

Well, to have a glimpse into a solid textual tradition which might have influenced the early Greek poets is an exciting opportunity: it gives us an insight into the storytelling hot-pot in the Mediterranean basin, which lessens the gulfs between different cultures. But it could be misleading as well. We tend to think of influence in a literate way, with one author reading and referring to another written text in his own literate work. But the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are different: they stem from an oral tradition which seems to reach back well into the Bronze Age, and this was a

tradition which thrived on repetition and structural conservatism. So, once crossover takes place, similarities between the Greek and the Ancient Near East traditions are perhaps only to be expected, and as time goes on, similar stories and motifs become generalized throughout the tradition. This is an enormously complex process, and to reduce it to simple one-on-one derivation obscures that complexity, and makes Homer a much less exciting author.

Running home to mother: the motif of the wounded goddess

To show what I mean, let us turn to our first test case, from *Iliad* 5, where Aphrodite retreats to Olympus upon being wounded by Diomedes, and complains to her mother Dione. Scholars have long compared an episode in Tablet VI of *Gilgamesh*, where Ishtar journeys to heaven to complain about insults offered her by Gilgamesh, one of which was his refusal to grant his sexual favours. The sequences are close: an outraged goddess of love complains of her treatment at the hands of a mortal to her parents. Moreover, Antu and Dione (elsewhere unknown as Aphrodite’s mother) are simply the feminine forms of the word for ‘god’ in their respective languages (Babylonian and Greek). The conclusion – that Homer or a very recent predecessor has directly adapted a scene from *Gilgamesh* – has seemed inevitable to many people.

But let us take a step back. Firstly, the formation of Dione’s name is not unusual in Greek, being used by another early epic poet, Hesiod. Secondly, the name of a goddess *Di-wi-ja* or *Di-u-wa* – that is, the feminine of Zeus / Dios – appears on Linear B tablets from Pylos dating from the 13th century B.C. So this derivation is already a possibility in Bronze Age Greece, and this was a period in many ways fruitful for the Homeric tradition. The Pylos tablets were saved by accident (being baked in the fire which destroyed the palace), but they show that we must be cautious in fixing a single moment or a single text as the source for a phenome-

non, when we know so little about the earliest period of Greek history.

Furthermore, for all their similarities, we see differences too: Gilgamesh refuses to have sex with Ishtar, whilst Diomedes wounds Aphrodite in battle. Unlike Dione, Antu never speaks: Ishtar directs her complaint entirely to her father Anu, and he eventually gives her the Bull of Heaven to wreak her vengeance on the men of Uruk (Gilgamesh's city), while Zeus simply tells Aphrodite to stay away from the fighting. Moreover, this type of action – a divinity complaining to an unsympathetic parent – occurs several times in the *Iliad*, suggesting that these scenes are a typical part of the poet's repertoire. But perhaps the most important difference shows us the ethical complexity of Homer's divine universe: the fraught nature of power among the Olympian gods, with all their rivalry and competition, makes it possible for mortals to triumph, temporarily, over some deities because of the assistance of others. Gilgamesh's eventual triumph over the Bull of Heaven is a measure solely of his greatness as a hero, whilst the Homeric scene triggers off an entirely more complex, and to my mind more exciting, series of conclusions about the fundamentally intertwined nature of divine and mortal power.

So that tempting conclusion of a more or less direct relationship becomes a little more complicated. Despite the similarities, there is no reason why Homer had to have known *Gilgamesh* in order to construct his scene. Either the poets generated similar themes independently, or at least any process of interaction between Greek and Ancient Near East traditions was very ancient indeed. And, of course, we have to keep in mind the constant negotiation between mortal and immortal that makes Homer's epic world so engaging. There is much more going on here than a simple model of influence would allow us to see.

Heroic models: Akhilleus and Gilgamesh

My second case comes from what is often considered to be the strongest evidence for a direct relationship between Homer and *Gilgamesh* – the many similarities between the stories of Akhilleus/Patroklos and Gilgamesh/Enkidu: the hero, son of a divine mother and absent father, has a particular companion whose death sends him into a spiral from which he emerges after meeting with an older, wiser man. A particularly pronounced parallel is that both heroes encounter their companion's shade or ghost (*Iliad* 23; *Gilgamesh* Tablet XII), though again with differences: Patroklos' shade appears unbidden to the sleeping Akhilleus (as dreams do in early

Greek epic), Enkidu's is summoned by Gilgamesh after he complains to the gods about his friend's death and digs a hole in the ground specifically to let him out of the Underworld. Moreover, Patroklos' shade hastens the funeral process and prophesies Akhilleus' own death, whilst Enkidu is summoned well after burial, and his conversation with Gilgamesh is much more general. Finally, unlike the *Gilgamesh* epic, Akhilleus is unable to hug his friend's shade (similarly Odysseus and his mother's shade in *Odyssey* 11). So the match-up is not precise.

Evidence on the Greek side also makes it unlikely that Homer has simply derived this scene from an external source like *Gilgamesh*, since absent figures quite frequently appear to sleeping characters. Furthermore, several epic characters converse with shades in the Underworld, trips thereto not only being found in the *Odyssey* but also mentioned with regard to other heroes like Herakles. So it is quite natural for Homer to combine a dream sequence and such a conversation, not because he is using *Gilgamesh*, but because it is part of his constant strategy in the last third of the *Iliad* – to depict Akhilleus as approaching his death: he doesn't eat or have sex until almost the end of the poem, his mother Thetis and her sisters mourn for him whilst he is alive in book 18, he presides over Funeral Games in book 23 which in several respects look forward to his own burial, and Patroklos' shade actually predicts his death (23.80–1). By this late stage of the *Iliad*, Akhilleus is very close to death, and his exchange with Patroklos' shade invokes an action usually possible only in the Underworld with, or between, the dead. This is what Homer is doing with the theme, no matter from where it was originally derived, creating an exciting and subtly foreboding episode which brings the aura of death to his soon-to-die main character.

So in its sense, meaning, and construction, the encounter between Akhilleus and Patroklos' shade makes perfect sense within the *Iliad's* poetic purposes and inherited resources. Homer's choices are not explained by reference to some external source, but to his rich and varied tradition. If we still wish to appeal to Enkidu's visitation as an inspiration to this tradition, then an episode of this sort, to judge from the narrative's typical nature, was most likely a part of the Greek epic tradition long before the *Iliad*. Remember that the *Gilgamesh* episode is also present in the early Sumerian epic, *Bilgamesh and the Underworld* – it is an old story, which could have appeared in a Greek context at any point from the middle of the second millennium B.C. If there is a process of interaction, it is to be placed far in the prehistory of the Homeric poems, and its precise dynamics are much more complex than many seem to believe. And it should

never obscure the originality and excitement of Homer's own narrative.

Conclusion

The Ancient Near East is a wonderful, relatively new landscape for scholars seeking to understand the contexts and traditions which came together in the poetry of Homer. But the rush to its texts as explanations for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* does no justice to either side of the equation, and oversimplifies the long and incredibly complex process of cultural contact between Greek civilization(s) and their neighbours. Before we start drawing lines from *Gilgamesh* to Homer, let us appreciate their differences and particularities, and the intricate process by which they came into being. Only then can one serve to illuminate, rather than limit, the other.

Adrian Kelly is Tutorial Fellow in Ancient Greek Literature at Balliol College, Oxford. He is the author of A referential commentary and lexicon to Homer, Iliad VIII (Oxford University Press 2007) and Sophocles: Oedipus at Colonus (Duckworth 2009). He is currently working on an edition with commentary of Iliad 23.